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BALTIMORE SUN
17 August 1986

Intelligence isn't the answer

By Allan E. Goodman

Recently, terrorists in France, West Germany, Spain, Portugal and Lebanon have intensified their war against governments and civilians with devastating effect. In the wake of these attacks, government spokesmen here and in Europe have called for close cooperation between national intelligence agencies to prevent what they fear will be an upsurge of terrorism, especially by small, newly formed groups of extremists.

In theory, the full and timely sharing of information that these organizations have should help both to ferret out terrorists and to prevent them from striking. In fact, the United States and most free world leaders have called since 1980 for such cooperation to combat the apparent rise in the number of terrorist groups and the lethality of their attacks.

The public cannot know how much information sharing has actually taken place or whether it has made a difference. White House sources, for example, have consistently maintained that intelligence sharing even among the most closely allied countries has been inadequate. But the theory is wrong. National intelligence agencies are poorly organized and ill-equipped to go after terrorists.

By their nature, intelligence organizations do not encourage a free flow or wide sharing of information. These organizations operate on the basis of the compartmentalization of information where dissemination is restricted to those with "a need to know." But what is needed in the war against terrorists is a base of extensive information about why such groups form and how they operate. This information will come from many sources and needs to be available to those involved in all phases of counterterrorism, ranging from analysis to prediction to arrest.

Intelligence agencies are also reluctant to share their information and sources with other countries. This aversion stems from the fear that the other countries' services have been penetrated by "moles" — double agents working for hostile countries. In light of the recent and multiple penetrations of the British, French and West German services, such fears are well founded and create an atmosphere that discourages information sharing on a truly international basis.

And because intelligence agencies are secret governmental organizations, they tend

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to restrict the dissemination of reports to a limited number of government officials. This means that the most vulnerable targets of the terrorists — the private businessman or traveler against whom the threat has risen over the past three years — are least likely to be warned by their governments in time to take countermeasures.

Finally, countering terrorism requires a substantial budget. But within present intelligence agencies, there are many other competing priorities that get the lion's share of resources. The units responsible for working on the problem of terrorism do not have the clout to demand more or to take away money from those units involved, for example, in high-tech collection efforts.

So while I think there is a need for an international effort to counter terrorism, I have increasing doubt that intelligence is the right discipline on which it should be based.

A better model is that of a police force.

By their nature, police departments are pro-active. They aim at explicitly deterring and catching criminals and do so by warning the civilian population of suspected threats and then by working within the populace for leads once a crime has been committed. Intelligence agencies shun working in the public view and are not prepared or authorized to apprehend or pre-empt suspected terrorists.

If the experts are right about the upsurge of small-group terrorism ahead, what is needed to combat it is an "Interpol" — an international organization of police departments designed to promote and facilitate reciprocal cooperation and the exchange of information. Currently, the police forces of some 125 nations are members of Interpol.

As a first step, in fact, government leaders should consider changing Interpol's constitution to permit anti-terrorist intelligence activities. This would capitalize on the tendency for police departments to work in cooperation with one another, as they did in safeguarding the athletes and spectators at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and at the recent celebration of the restoration of the Statue of Liberty. Such police actions should now be greatly expanded across international boundaries if we are going to make any real progress in containing the current epidemic of terrorism.